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The Editor Reflects **Tom Erb**

Reviving Middle Grades Education by Returning to Fundamentals

Both America's entrepreneurial spirit and its education systems need revitalization. Both have succumbed to different versions of the same malaise: putting too much emphasis on the bottom line while losing sight of core values. The heart of entrepreneurship—creative problem solving in response to society's needs—and the core of educational practice—fostering students in developing a broad range of skills, habits of mind, character traits, and social awareness to promote sustainable futures for themselves, their families, and their communities—seem to have been subverted by seeking to accumulate personal wealth on the one hand or focusing on raising standardized test scores on the other. Easy to measure and flaunt, these simplistic measures of success have diverted both our private institutions and our public schools from their fundamental missions.

Commentators have been railing against the various failures of our education systems for as long as I have been alive—with a crescendo building over the past quarter century. In the eyes of many, we have been a "nation at risk" since the early 1980s. Examine the following quotes, all written in 1982 or 1983, collected by Linda Campbell (2009), editorial writer for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

> There's danger that the public trusts standardized tests as the only way they can know how a local school is doing. … I hope the focus is on learning and academics and rigor, and it will come … that test scores will improve. *(Bob Cameron, College Board)*

> In many cases, economic concerns and lack of parental and community support combine with such factors as a language barrier, low attendance and high mobility to inhibit students in largely Hispanic areas. *(Linda Campbell, editorial writer,* Fort Worth Star-Telegram*)*

> The foundation for American education has to be the home. No school can compensate fully for failure in the home. And we've had massive failure in homes in this country. *(Terrel Bell, U.S. Secretary of Education)*

These quotes offer just a taste of the dilemma facing us: We have not made noticeable progress toward solving any of these problems, which remain further from solution today than they were 25 years ago. Yes, there have been bright spots where small-scale programs have worked. There have been interventions initiated both from outside and inside the schools, but can we claim that systemic change has occurred that has resulted in our public schools doing a better job today of educating, across the board, our diverse array of American youth?

Keep Your Eyes on the Recovery Point, Not the Wall

These quotes are as current today as they were in the early 1980s. Why no more progress after more than 25 years of tinkering with the shortcomings of our schools? Let the following quote guide us as we attempt to understand the predicament of education.

> Good race drivers are taught that if their car is going out of control and heading to the wall, don't look at the wall. You immediately look at the recovery point. You have to look where you want to go. Your physiology is attached to what you look at. You are drawn towards what you picture. (Tice, et al., 1999)

The time is right for us, as educators and citizens, to reinvent middle schools and public education, generally. While the ineffectiveness of public education and the middle grades, in particular, may be most obvious in our inner cities, with our language diverse students, with our special needs students, and with our low-income students, these conditions are, perhaps, just the canaries in the mines of education. While schools in a wide variety of communities have remained, in many ways, resistant to change over the past 25 years, our social makeup, our communications technology, and our economic realities have changed around us, rendering schools as we have run them irrelevant and ineffective.

Our first challenge is to stop looking at the wall and start looking for the recovery point. We can start

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by banning the following phrases—each of which is someone's explanation for the failure of schools: The parents don't care. Incompetent teachers are hiding behind their unions. Administrators are too rigid and into controlling kids. Students are too unprepared, too undisciplined, too disrespectful, too disinterested, *ad nauseum*. Taxpayers are too stingy. Politicians are too punitive. Teacher educators are irrelevant.

While members of these groups may have contributed to the problems we face, can you imagine any significant improvement in our schools that does not involve *every one* of these groups? We are dependent on each other for our futures and the futures of our youth. Which group above has enough wisdom, knowledge, power, resources, influence, energy, skill, or courage to act alone to solve the problems society faces in educating our children for productive citizenship? No one group can be held accountable for the success or failure of public education, nor can any group be forgiven for not seeking out, listening to, and collaborating with the others to get our schools on the road to success.

So, what does the recovery point for American education look like? I shall not be so presumptuous to provide the answer, but I shall attempy to begin the journey of discovery. Indeed, this issue of *Middle School Journal* gives voice to 11 different perspectives on what the recovery point might look like—among them a middle grades classroom teacher who has lived curriculum integration; a United States senator who has co-sponsored the "Success in the Middle" Act; a leader in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development who has analyzed different national success rates; a former middle school principal who is an authority on technology in instruction; a former senior staffer of the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families in the U.S. House of Representatives who now heads the Asia Society's International Studies Schools Network; a director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing; John Lounsbury, "the conscience of the middle school movement"; the leader of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills; a retired middle grades teacher, principal, teacher educator and national leader in middle grades education; and three active, influential members of the middle grades research community.

You might be thinking either, "We've heard this all before," or "What they say sounds good on paper, but how can this possibly work in the real world?" Indeed, as I noted early in this column, we have been hearing criticisms and plans for improvement for more than a half century. However, commentators, including me, tend to focus on one or another aspect of the problem or use ideological blinders to place blame on one element alone, supposedly responsible for school failure. The eleven articles in this issue can help us broaden our understanding of the multiple dimensions of middle school revitalization with examples of how aspects of this recovery are being successfully implemented today.

In addition, to see a comprehensive success story documenting what can be done to overcome the inertia of despair and inaction, one can do no better than pick up *Stand for the Best,* Thomas Bloch's (2008) personal account of how and why he gave up a nearly $1,000,000 annual income as CEO of H & R Block to become a middle grades math teacher in inner-city Kansas City, Missouri. He vividly details his personally poignant journey to becoming an insightful, caring, and skilled teacher of young adolescents, as life was radically different for him down at St. Francis Xavier School on Troost Avenue compared to life high in the corporate headquarters of H & R Block.

However, Tom Bloch's book is about far more than his personal journey. It is the story of how to mobilize many constituencies to bring about and sustain the systemic educational changes that make a difference in the lives of young people, their families, and their communities. Tom Bloch chronicles the winding path to establishing University Academy, a very successful K–12 charter school in inner-city Kansas City. He describes the collaborations, the networking, and the resources, both material and human, that families and the larger community contributed to the success of this school, which Tom Bloch continues to serve in two very different roles: teacher of mathematics and life to seventh graders and president of University Academy School Board.

Fundamentals of Revitalization

To frame the discussion of factors to consider, we must look well beyond the intended outcomes of formal instruction. We must consider a wide range of factors that interact to develop educated young adults. Schwab (1973) has suggested that we cannot understand the educational process unless we understand the interactions of four clusters of factors that define that process. It is fairly clear that factors

associated with *teachers* represent one of these important clusters affecting learning. Although many people believe teachers to be, by far, the most influential element in learning, not since the days of Socrates and Jesus have teachers, lacking institutional support, exclusively influenced the education of their students. Unfortunately, factors outside their "classrooms" brought abrupt ends to each of these two illustrious teaching careers. Schwab argued that we cannot understand learning without understanding the *milieu* that affects learning. The milieu, a cluster of factors beyond the classroom that either promotes or inhibits learning, is critical to the success of classroom interactions between teachers and *students,* whose various characteristics constitute the third cluster, which we all too often focus on, as if students' qualities are all that matters in learning outcomes. The fourth cluster, *subject matter,* is another area that many observers focus on as the most important consideration in defining the role of schooling.

However, trying to understand and then improve education by focusing on just one of these clusters is akin to the blind man describing an elephant—he felt the tail and said it was a rope; he felt the flank and said it was a wall; he felt the trunk and said it was a hose; he felt the ear and said it was a large leaf. We cannot fix education by focusing on our favorite part of the elephant and trying to fix a leaf, a wall, a hose, or a rope when we are dealing with the elephant of education. The wide variety of thoughtful commentators in this issue of *Middle School Journal* can help us begin to see the elephant for what it is. Then, as we better understand the long- and short-term effects of schooling as it currently exists, we can undertake the task of improving that enterprise. That "we" includes educators, parents, community members, policymakers, public officials, and students.

Let me make a modest proposal for starting this process at the school and community level. Determine what factors are causing dropouts in your local community and creatively work to solve these problems. No matter how high the test scores of the survivors who complete their educations, no educational program can be deemed successful with high dropout rates. There likely will not be a simple answer—one causal factor—but rather, some combination of factors in the schools: student skill deficits (students), unsafe conditions—everything from classic bullying to the school sitting next to a toxic waste site (milieu), irrelevant curriculum (subject matter), disengaging instruction (teacher/subject matter), misguided assessment (subject matter/milieu), climate of disrespect and distrust (milieu/teachers/students), outdated technologies (milieu/subject matter), disjointed learning experiences (milieu/teachers). Other factors will be related to what students bring to school: lack of hope (students/milieu), no vision of their futures (students), obligations to a struggling family (milieu/students), unsafe neighborhoods (milieu), lack of positive adult guidance—or negative mentors leading youth astray (milieu/students), taxing living conditions—including homelessness (milieu), families with profound social, health, and economic problems (milieu). After diagnosing these factors at the local level, we can then access those resources in the four clusters that can help craft learning environments relevant to helping young people create better futures.

The wealthiest, most enterprising nation on earth needs to decide that creating the world's best education system is at least as important as the 1960s goal of putting a man on the moon or the unofficial goal in recent decades of amassing material possessions. Maybe it is even more important than the "war on terror"—maybe it is a significant part of the solution to creating a world in which terror loses its appeal as a means to "better" the world. Just as education cannot fix itself without a broadly based effort to revitalize it, better education alone cannot make a better world in the absence of just economies, just legal systems, and open political processes. However, can we really imagine any human progress in the absence of educational systems that provide youngsters opportunity for academic excellence, in an environment of respect for all individuals and hope for their futures?

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